JOHN KEATS, THE GREAT ROMANTICIST

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KEATS, THE GREAT ROMANTICIST.

CHAPTER I.

It is the purpose of this thesis to show that John Keats possessed all the essentially Romantic characteristics of Byron, Coleridge, Shelley, and Wordsworth, plus his own-restraint. A word, by way of introduction on Romanticism, which stands alone among literary movements in having exercised upon verse and prose an equal and similar, though not identical, transforming power, seems necessary. The heightened imagination and finer sensibility to beauty, from which it sprang, reacted powerfully upon a language rich in unused faculty and neglected tradition. Like every other English version of a great European movement, English Romanticism had its peculiar originality, strength, and limitations; its chief glory lay in the extraordinarily various, intimate, and subtle interpretation of the world's external nature, wonder and romance, which the familiar comradeship of nature generates in the mind of man. The experience and convictions of poets are conditioned by the age in which they live. Having as poets sensitive, receptive, and retentive minds, they have from birth absorbed from influences, environments,
and currents of ideas of their own times and those just preceding, far more than they are conscious of, or they can measure. The poets of the Romantic age made a sharp break with the poetry of the age preceding them. Criticism concerns itself chiefly with the difference between poetry before and after 1798. However, the spirit of the eighteenth century ran deeply in the young lives of Coleridge and Wordsworth, and in the whole careers of Shelley and Byron.¹

The poets of English Romanticism had definite limitations, as the following pages will attempt to show. They lacked vision for the world of man, except in certain broad and simple aspects—the patriot, the peasant, the visionary, the child, and understanding of the past, except at certain points on which the spirit of liberty had laid a fiery finger. Yet Keats, one of the great revealing poets of his time, was in some ways many-sided. With Wordsworth's profound veracity, and Coleridge's weird touch, he unites Shelley's passion for and mastery of beauty. "But the beauty he pursued was less visionary, more concrete, definite, quiescent; the beauty, not of energy, but of luxurious repose." Therefore it did not ally itself, as in Shelley, with the passion of freedom; upon Keats then the teaching of the Revolution neither exercised its stimulus nor imposed its limitations.²

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¹ Gingerich, Essays in the Romantic Poets, p. 124.
² Herford, op. cit., p. 254.
CHAPTER II.

I.

The first poet under consideration is Lord Byron. The life of Byron was a mask of action, to which his poetry is but the moralizing accompaniment of words. "One whose dust was once all fire," were the words Byron used of Rousseau, but they may still more truthfully be applied to himself. Byron still lives with incomparable vividness, because he was a man first and a poet afterwards. A personality he was most of his life, looking out for his own formula, and his experiments upon that search were precisely of the kind to thrill the world. What poet ever had so splendid a legend in his lifetime? In the eyes of men Byron spent his whole life, and was enough actor to delight in that version of "all the world's a stage."

"His beauty and his deformity, his tenderness, roughness, delicacy, coarseness, sentiment, sensuality, soaring and groveling, dirt and deity, all mixed up in that one compound of inspired clay," (it is his own summary of Burns), worked together with circumstances to move every heart to admiration and pity. Byron was a poet who did what others only wrote, and wrote what others dared not even to think. It was a romantic time, gigantic and exaggerated.

Circumstances made Byron a poet; hence he became the

poet of circumstance, which, with him, was an emotion. He was the imperfect idealist of real things, never without a certain suspicion of his ideal, turning life into an impossible kind of romance invented by one who was romantic, like a man who becomes romantic when he loves. But such an experience does not change his nature, or give him sincerity in romance.

Byron's sincerity underlies, but does not transmute, his romance. This is partly because the style is the man. Byron had no style, through which alone emotion can prove its own sincerity. With 1 him all convulsions end in rhyme. He was convinced that the great object in life is sensation—to feel existence, even though in pain—and he was constantly satisfying himself of the latter part of his conviction. Rhyme was at once the relief and expression, which shows the confusion of that double motive. His sole, entire, sincere reason for writing at all was to withdraw himself from himself. Much of Byron's earlier poetry is formless, apparently insincere, because of the conflict between the fact which insists on coming with the emotion, and the alien kind of fact, which represents itself as an escape from the emotion.

Like Shelley, Byron was intensely modern in his emotions, but retrospective in his thought. Scott says that Byron managed his pen with the careless and negligent ease of a man of quality; that no one should be a rhymer who could be anything better; that he does not rank poetry and poets high in the scale of

intellect; and that it is the lava of imagination, whose eruption prevents an earthquake.¹

"The lava of imagination, whose eruption prevents an earthquake", is exactly what poetry was to Byron. It is characteristic of him that even for the sake of a generalization, he cannot look beyond himself. A stanza in "Childe Harold" defines yet more precisely his ideal:

"Could I embody and unbosom now
That which is most within me,—could I wreak
My thoughts upon expression, and thus throw
Soul, heart, mind, passions, feelings, strong or weak—
All that I would have sought, and all I seek,
Bear, know, feel, and yet breathe—into one word,
And that one word were Lightning, I would speak."²

Indeed at his best, he did speak, condensing the indignation of his soul or the wrath of Europe into that one word, lightning, which flashes out intermittently from among the dreariest clouds, and he is not even sure whether his lightning has flashed or not.

"The poetry of Byron swept Europe like a flood—
fresh, bold, tumultuous, and not without its mire. But, like the flood, its sound and fury soon abated. Yet it cannot be truly said that the stream has run quite dry. Something remains".³

Byron's fame, like that of every other English poet, was never in his lifetime, a merely English reputation,

but was kept alive in other countries more persistently than in England. He will never be a poet without honor, save, perhaps, in his own country. It is hardly possible to convince a foreigner that Byron is not even correct as a writer of verse. He is at a loss to understand why one should bring a petty charge against Byron's lines, so full of an echoing substance, which rings true to the ear that has not naturalized itself in English poetry. "The magic of words, in which Byron is lacking, the poverty of rhythm, for which he is so conspicuous, do not tell with any certainty through the veil of another idiom".

Byron's theory and practice of poetry were both faulty, one telling against the other. His theory was that the finest English poetry is to be found in Pope, but he admitted frankly that he had not followed with attention so correct a master, for which fact he apologized by saying that it is easier to perceive the wrong than to pursue the right.

His qualities in verse are far more oratorical than poetical. In all his earlier work theory accentuated this natural tendency so fatally that a great deal of false glitter must be scraped off to find the good metal which is often found even in metrical romances. In narrative verse Byron invented a form of his own which exactly suited him, but in lyrical verse he learned no more than that which he was already capable of doing in the "Hours of Idleness."

His last lines are firmer in measure and graver in substance, but are written exactly on the same principle as the "Well! Thou Art Happy" of 1808. There is the same strained simplicity of feeling. Every stanza says precisely what he means to say, without evading a more purely poetic style. Byron's mind was without subtlety; hence he has an immediate hold upon the average man or woman who needs not come to his verse with a mind already prepared for that communion. He has force, clearness, but no atmosphere; everything is seen detached, a little bare, very distinct, in a strong light without shadows. "In Byron's verse much of the restlessness and tumult of the age finds expression; but it is through the strength of his egoism that he is the most subjective of the brilliant band of poets of that upheaving period." 1 His "Lorrai and "Giaours" and "Childe Harold" are but superficially variegated reduplications of himself.

Byron's poetic genius was of a very high order, distinguished for clearness and intensity. "Lord Byron's most striking literary quality was variety, or mobility, the power of shifting quickly from point to point, from idea to idea, from one feeling to another, from high to low and low to high, with speciousness, producing a dazzling effect, revealing upon analysis a lack of calm penetration, of conscious and sustained nobility of thought,

1. Calvert, Coleridge-Shelley-Goethe, p. 73.
of profound intellectual consistency."¹

His grand forte was extraordinary medley, but laid stress on personal, experiential, and phenomenal existence. The great law of fatality drove Byron into a world of satire and ironical laughter. His intellect partook in a remarkable degree of the character of his emotional nature. Lord Byron is a signal instance of the fluctuations of literary fashion. Elevated to the highest pinnacle of fame by his contemporaries, he was unduly decried after his death, when the romance which he had thrown around himself and his writings began to wear away; and it is only during the last twenty or thirty years that the proper place has been found for him in the public estimation. The resources of his intellect were amazing. He gained his first reputation as a depicter of the gloomy and stormful passions, but it was only under the influence of intense feeling or passion that he could put forth his poetical powers with any success. And since everything he has written is so strongly colored with his own personal feelings, he is perhaps the most intensely subjective of all the great poets that ever lived. This explains why he had no genius for dramatic composition. He could only represent successfully those characters which resembled his own. His soul was not capacious nor calm

¹ Gingerich, op. cit. p. 273.
enough to reflect without distortion the infinitely varied pictures presented by the comedy and tragedy of human life. Wit and understanding, rather than imagination, were his leading intellectual traits. His most remarkable characteristic, as a poet, was his power of expressing intense passion, particularly of the darker and fiercer kinds.

His brilliant, though unequal, genius was subordinate to the power of his personality. It is noticeable in Byron's art that whenever he treated of a subject not directly related to his personal experience, he was comparatively unsuccessful, as in the historic plays of his later years, such as "Marino Faliero" and "The Two Foscari", and others, which fact proves that opportunity for him to achieve distinction did not lie in handling impersonal themes. A strongly marked perversity of his genius is that whenever he reached a spiritually lofty level, as in the last part of "Cain" and in certain parts of "Childe Harold," he immediately receded to an opposite or at least a decidedly lower level.

Throughout his literary career Byron manifested so strange an admixture of courage and self-pity, sincerity and posing, faith in man and cynicism, radicalism and respect for tradition, serious thought and flippant comment, such a rapid shifting, that it is extremely difficult to find a center from which to interpret his poetry. Nevertheless
there is a serious strain of constructive thinking in him. If one leaves out of account the more frivolous and the merely amusing of his verse, and also considers only incidentally his satiric writings, remembering that he was perhaps mainly satirist, one can find certain basic principles of thought in his work, a view of the cosmos, a characteristic reaction to Nature and to human life; and can discern a certain development of his views.

In studying Byron one is always face to face with the question; "Can the intention, in art, ever excuse performance?" "Can the sum of a number of noughts arrive at an appreciable figure?" Wordsworth wearies one by commonplace of thought and feeling, by nervelessness of rhythm, by a deliberate triviality; Coleridge offers metaphysics for poetry; but with Byron the failure is not exceptional, it is constant; it is like the speech of a man whose tongue is too large for his mouth. There are indeed individual good lines in Byron, a great number of quite splendid lines, though none indeed of the very finest order of poetry; but there is not a single poem, not a single passage of the length of "Kubla Khan," perhaps not a single stanza, which can be compared as poetry with a poem or passage or stanza of Keats or Shelley. What is not there is precisely the magic which seems to make poetry its finer self, the perfume of the flower, that by which the flower is

1. Idem., p. 243.
remembered, after its petals have dropped or withered. When Byron meditates, he contemplates with fixed attention; if he dreams, he dreams with open eyes, to which the darkness is aglow with tumultuous action; he is at the mercy of none of those wandering sounds, delicate spirits of the air, which come entreating their liberty from the indefinite, in the releasing bondage of song. Poetry came to him by a happy and inevitable accident; it was his way of recording the sensations. Byron liked nature in vast movement. Discoverers, travelling students, or gypsies, were at the root of all his nature-worship, and all his eloquent writing about landscapes and places which was written not only with the words used in talking, but in exactly the order and construction. Unlike Keats and Shelley, or even Wordsworth, or much more Coleridge, Byron was content with the language as it is, and with the boisterous contempt for rules, his headlong way of getting to the journey's end, discovered that poetry, which is speech as well as song, can be written in the very words used in talking. And, besides realizing this truth for other people who were to come later and make a different use of the discovery, he experienced for himself that he could make poetry entirely conversational, thus getting closer to that world which was "too much for him". Who in English poetry before Byron
has ever talked in verse?

Never, in English verse, has a man been seen who was so much a man and so much an Englishman. It is not a man in the elemental sense, so much as the man of the world, whom they find reflected, in a magnificent way, in this poet for whom society exists as well as human nature. No man of the world could feel ashamed of himself for writing poetry like "Don Juan," if he could write it.

"Don Juan," a long poem in sixteen cantos, is Byron's greatest work. For sheer technical skill, it is his supreme achievement. It is partly autobiographic. "The sinister, gloomy Don Juan is an ideal picture of the author, who was sore and bitter over his thwarted hopes of liberty and happiness. Therefore, instead of strengthening humanity with hope for the future, this poem tars hope from the horizon, and suggests the possible anarchy and destruction toward which the world's hypocrisy, cant, tyranny, and universal stupidity are tending." The poem, issued piecemeal, is unfinished.

"Byron followed Don Juan through all the phases of life known to himself. The hero has exciting adventures and passionate loves, he is favored at courts, he is driven to the lowest depths of society, he experiences a godlike happiness and a demoniacal despair.

"Don Juan" is a scathing satire upon society. All its

1. Halleck, English Literature, p. 413.
fondest idols,—love, faith, and hope,—are dragged in the
mire. There is something almost grand in the way that Byron
draws pictures of love only to mock at them, sings patriotic
songs only to add:—

"Thus sung, or would, or could, or should, have sung
The modern Greek in tolerable verse,"1

and mentions Homer, Milton, and Shakespeare only to show
2 how accidental and worthless is fame. Bright and destructive as keen steel, the endless stanzas of this poem tell
their story of homeless adventure and disillusioned rage.

But sometimes the misery of the man Byron does break through
the mask of irony and then one seems to hear a heartbroken
wanderer sobbing in a lonely place:

"And when his bones are dust, his grave a blank,
His station, generation, even his nation,
Becomes a thing, or nothing, save to rank
In chronological commemoration,
Some dull MS. oblivion long has sank,
Or graven stone found in a barrack's station",3

and then among the confusion of pathos, irony, passion,
mockery, keen wit, and brilliant epigram, displaying
Byron's versatile and spontaneous genius at its height,
4 there are some beautiful and powerful passages:

"Ave Maria! 'tis the hour of prayer,
Ave Maria! 'tis the hour of love!
Ave Maria! may our spirits dare
Look up to thine and to the Son's above!
Ave Maria! oh that face so fair!
Those downcast eyes beneath the almighty dove—
What though 'tis but a pictured image strike—
That painting is no idol, 'tis too like"5

2. Halleck, op. cit., p. 413.
3. "Don Juan", Canto III, Stanza 89.
5. "Don Juan", Canto III, Stanza 103.
Byron's little song which serves well as the measure of his poetic talent is found in "Don Juan," and begins as follows:

"Tis sweet to hear
At midnight on the blue and moonlit deep
The song and oar of Adria's gondolier,
By distance mellow'd, o'er the waters sweep;
'Tis sweet to see the evening star appear;
'Tis sweet to listen, as the night-winds creep
From leaf to leaf; 'tis sweet to view on high
The rainbow, based on ocean, span the sky.

'Tis sweet to hear the watch-dog's honest bark
Bay deep-mouthed welcome as we draw near home;
'Tis sweet to know there is an eye will mark
Our coming, and look brighter when we come;
'Tis sweet to be awakened by the lark,
Or lulled by falling waters; sweet the hum
Of bees, the voice of girls, the song of birds,
The lisp of children, and their earliest words."

That may not be great poetry, and may not be compared with a sonnet of Wordsworth; but all like to read it, and all feel better after reading because it is good, honest sentiment expressed in a melodious way. But in the next stanza, Byron grows commonplace and ends with:

"Sweet is revenge, especially to women,
Pillage to soldiers, prize-money to seamen."2

That is bad sentiment and worse rime, having no resemblance to poetry. It is unworthy of the poet's talent or the reader's patience.

So it is with a large part of Byron's work, which often begins well, and generally has some vivid description of nature, or some gallant passage in swinging verse, stirring

1. Canto I, Stanza 122.
2. Canto I, Stanza 124.
one like martial music. Then the poem falls to earth like lead, and presently appears some wretched pun or jest or scurrility.  

"But "Don Juan" is also a kind of catalogue of everything which decent readers must loathe in Byron: it shows his habit of centering all the world upon its own egoistic and blighted personality; his blending of self-pity with a profane and gross disrespect for things that are more sacred than any man could be; his tendency to flay enemies with heartless laughter for the mere sport of seeing them writhe; and his totally unbalanced preaching of liberty and license."  

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2. Shuster, English Literature, p. 284.
Unlike Byron, Coleridge was in the objectivity of his mind's movement. His nature was not self-busied while depicting imaginary persons and scenes. Large and lively themes effaced the self in him. In its poetic flights, his imagination freed itself from personality. This was not due to the largeness of his intellect, or to the power of his poetic imagination, but to the sobriety of his self-seeking impulses. Coleridge was not a self-sufficient man; there was no assumption, no arrogance in him. Perhaps he is one of the few English writers who understood the elements of poetry and the way in which they may be best combined to produce certain impressions. His definitions of the merits and difference in style and poetic genius, between the earliest and latest writers of his country, surpass those which any one else could make; for, truly, he long and deeply pondered upon them, and no one can be dissatisfied with the reason he gives, and the examples he produces to bear out his theories and opinions.

Coleridge shows his taste and judgment by being one of the first to point out, with temper and sound reasoning, the fallacy of a great portion of Wordsworth's poetic theory relating to low life. Wordsworth held that a proper poetic

1. Calvert, op. cit., p. 75.
diction is a language from the mouths of men in general, in their natural conversation under the influence of natural feelings. Coleridge wisely maintained that philosophers are the authors of the best parts of language, not clowns.¹

"The mind of Coleridge was multifold. It had pinions, and it was armed with blades; it could soar, and it could delve; it was poetical and philosophical; it was critical and creative; it was moved to embody the beautiful and to penetrate the abstruse. During his latter years he strove to dig deeper into the mines of metaphysics and theology, whose subtle problems he had sought in his younger years."²

The pages of Coleridge have more life and light in them than those of most writers. Besides a generous conception of the capabilities of human nature, he was both a thinker and a poet. It is this conception which gives warmth and depth and truth to his delineations and reflections.³ He was one of the most original of men. In his mind there was a light so individual and strong that it cast fresh illumination on human conditions and relations; and, since he wrote and talked, the problems of life are less enigmatical, its spiritual capabilities more apparent, its hopes more assured and more elevated. Coleridge, like some other men of his high order, was too original to be at once appreciated, because to men of routine, originality is

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1. Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats, Poetical Works, p. IX.
3. Ibid., p. 117.
A full image of Coleridge's mental stature cannot be obtained from his printed pages, rich, various and original, as they are. He had a marvelous, a unique gift of speech. All through his manhood he drew a choice circle around him, and instructed, stimulated and awakened men's minds by his affluent, ready, expressive discourse.

It was in the last quarter of his life, especially in the last decade, that many eager, admiring listeners, among them some of the master spirits of the age, sought Coleridge for the eloquence and wisdom of his speech. In these susceptible brains he sowed ideas that are still coming up laden with nutritious thought. The pages of the volume of "Table Talk," rich as they are, give convincing evidence of the soundness of Coleridge's critical and ethical judgments, of his range of knowledge and fertility of resources.

"By a Law of Nature, he, who labors under a strong feeling, is impelled to seek sympathy; but a Poet's feelings are all strong. "Quicquid amat valde amat." Akenside therefore speaks with philosophical accuracy when he classes Love and Poetry, as producing the same effects." Human love is the leading point in Coleridge's work. Though love is the word which he uses of himself, he really meant an affectionate sympathy in which there seems to have been little element of passion, but sympathy alone is not enough.

There must be admiration whose warmth will enkindle to its tenderest our charity, while admiration and charity, with their united glow, will dissolve into vapor any thought on the weaknesses and failures of this remarkable man.

Coleridge's poetic genius, the highest of many gifts, found brilliant and fascinating expression. His famous poems are as unique as they are memorable; their small number, their confined range and the brief period during which his faculty was exercised with full freedom and power seem to indicate a narrow vein, but the remainder of his work in prose and verse shows extraordinary and abundant intellectual force. In proportion as his imaginative creations stand apart, the spirit out of which they came must have possessed some singularity. His style in prose writing was cumbrous and his matter involved, but he must be recognized as being the greatest seminal mind of his time, wonderfully suggestive and brilliant.

His fascinating poetry reminds one of the charm which Coleridge had in life, that quality which arrested attention and drew men's minds and hearts with a sense of something marvelous in him—"the most wonderful man", said Wordsworth, "that I ever met."¹

At about the age of thirty, Coleridge stood at the threshold of a period in which he promised to become the great transcendental and religious poet of the age, but in

this he disappointed the world. There are only a few straggling poems as a record of his achievement. His prose, upon which he spent his greatest efforts, is also fragmentary. Various reasons have been assigned for Coleridge's failure in poetry. Some of them are obvious, others more subtle. Perhaps the most serious cause was a strong natural tendency in Coleridge toward the abstract, especially in his earliest poetry, but a little later he succeeded in rendering these in his best poetry in terms of concrete representation, imaginative suggestion, and deep feeling.

Coleridge's career reminds one of the lights of a vessel, gleaming off-shore and occasionally buried by the waves. His poetry is fantastic, shadowy, and restless in quite the same way. Creature of enthusiasm that Coleridge was, it is not surprising that his best poetry should have been almost entire the creation of his two happiest years. He himself believed that "Christabel," which he never finished, was the finest of all his poems, and it is generally known that upon some minds "Christabel" produces an extraordinary effect. But the ordinary readers mostly rank even the priceless fragments of this poem far below the wholly splendid and amazing "Rime of the Ancient Mariner". Indeed, there are many persons who treasure

1. Gingerich, op. cit., p. 43-44.
"The Ancient Mariner" not only as the best of the works of
Coleridge, but also as the greatest single poem in the
English language. "The Ancient Mariner" was to be
Wordsworth and Coleridge's joint work, but Wordsworth re-
tired from the task, and the scheme was changed in favor
of a joint volume of poems, "Lyrical Ballads," which con-
tained four contributions of Coleridge, including "The
Rime of the Ancient Mariner". This most popular of poetic
masterpieces is really a commonplace ballad raised to the
height of imaginative art by genius. It is rounded as a
gem, and the light that plays through it is unstained by
a single flaw. The origin was a dream which Coleridge re-
lated to Wordsworth, who suggested a few details. The
poem remains a dream, with that mingled vividness and
vagueness of scene which belongs to the marvelous
countries visited in sleep.

"The very deep did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be!
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea.

About, about, and reel and rout,
The death-fires danced at night;
The water like the witch's oils,
Burnt green, and blue, and white."

With amazing color and speed the Ancient Mariner tells his
story of the albatross and its murder in the southern seas,
and of the punishment which followed. The old ballad
stanza is admirably employed, and gives the poem that

1. Lake English Classics—"The Rime of the Ancient
Mariner," p. 34.
alluring favor of far-off antiquity which is not the least of its charms.

The supernatural sphere into which it introduces the reader is a remarkable creation, with its curse, its polar spirit, the phantom ship, the seraph band, and the magic breeze. The mechanism of the poetry is a triumph of romantic genius. The meter, rhythm, and the music have well-nigh magical effect. Almost every stanza shows not only exquisite harmony, but also the easiest mastery of genius in dealing with those weird scenes which romanticists love. Though a moral is drawn, the poet preaches no philosophy and addresses himself solely to the imagination of his readers. His admirers have been countless: for though the world tires of many doctrines, it is never out of the mood for entertainment. The noble conclusion of the poem has for more than a hundred years continued to influence human conduct:

"He prayeth best who loveth best
    All things, both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
    He made and loveth all."

Unlike Wordsworth, Coleridge is not a poet of the earth and the common things of life. He is the poet of the air, of the regions beyond the earth, and of dreams. No poet invested the supernatural with more charm. He has a rare feeling for the beautiful, whether in the world of morals, of nature, or of the harmonies of sound.

1. Ibid., p. 55.
III.

Another poet who is the subject of study in this thesis is William Wordsworth. Of most poets it may be said that half of their work is more than the whole, but of none is this more true than of Wordsworth and Browning. Both of these are burdened with a mass of indifferent verse which seriously obscures the excellence of the remainder. Were half of all Wordsworth wrote destroyed, he would generally be acknowledged one of the three or four most original poets of our language. Sincerity was at the root of all Wordsworth's merits and defects, giving him his unapproachable fidelity to nature, and also his intolerable fidelity to his own whims. Wordsworth's power of thought was never on the level of his power of feeling, and he was wise, at least in his knowledge of himself, when in "The Tables Turned" he said:-

"One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can." 1

He felt instinctively, and his feeling was nature's. But thought, coming to him thus immediately and representing the thinking part of himself with unparalleled fidelity, spoke out of an intellect not responsive to the finer promptings of supreme intellectual energy. Often when he

was most solemnly satisfied with himself, he was really
showing his weakness most ingeniously, but he would listen
to no external criticism.

Wordsworth desired to lead a continuously poetic
life. To him it seemed that, if he wrote down in verse
anything which came to his mind, however trivial, it would
become poetry by the mere contact. His poetic life lacked
energy, and he refused to recognize that no amount of energy
will suffice for a continual production. The mind of
Coleridge worked with extraordinary energy, always at high
thinking power; but Coleridge has left us less finished
work than almost any other great writer, because it was
rare with him to be able to unite faultlessly. Wordsworth
was not even conscious of the necessity, or the part played
by skill and patience to wait for an opportunity, and to
seize it as it came. He wrote instinctively, mechanically,
and continually. To write always is really bad form of dis­
sipation, as it draws away the very marrow of the brain.
Only what concerns one vitally and is of intense interest to
one will interest all the world, but "Wordsworth often
wrote about matters which had not had time to sink into
him, or the likelihood of taking root in any but the upper
surface of his mind." Yet no other poet has been as clear
as Wordsworth in the avowal that the immediate end of
poetry is pleasure. "The end of poetry is to produce

1. Symons, op. cit., p. 79.
2. Ibid., p. 81.
excitement, in co-existence with an overbalance of pleasure," he says. But his poetry clearly shows that what he meant by "pleasure" is really an inward spiritual joy, which, in its various forms, charms him most as he sees it in the light of joy,—the rising light of dawn, or the waning light of sunset. There is hardly a sight or sound, from a violet to a mountain and from a birdnote to the thunder of a cataract, that is not reflected in some beautiful way in Wordsworth's poetry. "It might seem that Nature not only gave him the matter for his poem, but wrote his poem for him." He has none of the poet's pride in his own invention, only a confidence in the voices that he has heard speaking when others were aware of silence only. Yet he doesn't "make poetry" out of these things, but sets them down just as they come to him. In "Laodamia" and other poems like it, Wordsworth breaks through his own wise rule, and sets himself to compose, not taking things as they come. "Laodamia" is an attempt to be classic, to have those classic qualities of calmness, balance, natural dignity which had come of themselves, through mere truth to nature, to the humbleness of fact and the grandeur of impassioned thought illuminating it. Here Wordsworth would be Greek as the Greeks were, or rather as they seem to be. It is only in single lines that he succeeds; all the rest of the poem shows an effort to be something not himself. In this the
profoundly natural poet became "artificial" for once, for which reason the poem is classed among his masterpieces.

On the other hand, Wordsworth's sonnets are his finest work, both in substance and in form. The sonnet's "scanty plot of ground" suited him well because it forced him to be concise and dignified, yet allowed him to say straight out the particular message or emotion which was possessing him. It is true that the proportion of his bad sonnets to his good sonnets is so great, that even in Matthew Arnold's scrupulous selection, at least six out of the sixty would have been better omitted. Nowhere in his work has he put so much of his finest self into so narrow a compass, and nowhere are there so many splendid simple lines of such weight, such imaginative ardor.

One original obstacle to the favorable impression of the Wordsworthian poetry, an obstacle purely self-created, was his theory of poetic diction. In his own exquisite "Laodamia," in his sonnets, in his "Excursion," few are his obligations from that of books, or of prescriptive usage. The "Excursion" bristles beyond most poems with "dictionary" words; that is, polysyllabic words of Latin or Greek origin. And so it must ever be in meditative poetry upon some philosophic themes.

All Wordsworth's work is a search to unite life and joy. If a motto were to be chosen for Wordsworth's

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poetry, it might be this: "Rejoice, and again I say unto you, rejoice."

A contemporary and bosom friend of Coleridge, William Wordsworth, presents a rather striking contrast to that erratic genius. This celebrated poet was the founder of what is known as the Lake School of Poetry. The writings of Wordsworth belong to the departments of prose and poetry. In prose his essays and prefaces set forth a new theory respecting poetry: namely, it dismisses the artificial diction of the classical school, uses the common language of common people, and believes that all objects in nature—even the most lowly—may be idealized, and thus made worthy of artistic literary treatment. This is the world-wide democracy of art, a phase of the Romantic Movement.

In verse there is a very bulky volume from the pen of Wordsworth, "forty years of quiet lyric meditation upon nature and upon himself, for throughout all these pages he never loses sight of the personal equation; he is always the delightful egoist." There is nothing of the journalist in Wordsworth, though he took his writing with high seriousness; he was indifferent to the reception his poems received, but wrote because poetry, so to say, was bubbling inside him. Wordsworth carefully and thoughtfully evolved a theory of his art and then wrote to

1. Sheran, English Literature, p. 176.
exemplify his ideas of what poetry should be.

He had no sympathy with the notion that the poet should give the people what they want. On the contrary, he protested against the degrading desire for outrageous stimulation, and held that the Poet's office is to distill the fine essence of his accurate observation and profound thought. To him the purpose of poetry was to teach the young of every age to see, to think and to feel, and thus to become more securely and actively virtuous. This he derived not, as the Classicists held, from books, but directly from life and nature.

Wordsworth, more than any other English poet, interprets and glorifies the mystery of sound. He sits oftenest by the Ear-Gate listening to the whispers and murmurs of the invisible guests who throng that portal into "the city of Man-Soul". The whole spiritual meaning of nature seems to come to him in the form of sound.

Drawing a comparison from art, Wordsworth was the Millet of English poetry. His verse shows the same quality of perfect comprehension, of tender pathos, of absolute truth interfused with delicate beauty which makes Millet's "The Angelus", "The Gleaners", "The Sower", and "The Sheepfold" immortal visions of the lowly life. Place beside these pictures Wordsworth's "Solitary Reaper", "The Old Cumberland Beggar", "Margaret", who waited in her

1. Ibid, p. 177.
ruined cottage for her husband who never returned,
"Michael", the old shepherd who stood for days beside the
unfinished sheepfold that he had begun to build with his
lost son,

"And never lifted up a single stone", -1

If Millet's pictures are placed beside these, the poem will
bear the comparison.

Coleridge called Wordsworth "a miner of the human
heart". 2 But in his mining there is a striking peculiarity.
To bring out the rarest and least suspected treasures he
searched the most familiar places, by the simplest methods.
He discovered that there was an element of poetry, like
some metal of great value, diffused through the common
clay of every-day life. But he did not succeed in sepa­
rating the metal from the surrounding dross. Limita­
tions in his mind, such as the lack of a sense of humor,
prevented his distinguishing the familiar and precious
from the merely familiar. 3

Yet Wordsworth consecrated his life to poetry,
issuing volume after volume, and for a long time meeting
with little favor. Finally his serene belief in himself
was justified by full recognition, but his work is
difficult to classify, it being so uneven.

In striking contrast with the restless, passionate
life of Byron stands the peaceful, uneventful life of

1. Wordsworth's Poetical Works, p. 163.
2. Van Dyke, op. cit., p. 216.
3. Ibid., p. 217.
Wordsworth. Instead of furious, tormenting passions, there is a self-poised, peaceful life of contemplation. Wordsworth brought to mountain, stream and flower the docility of a reverent and loving spirit. His soul was open to the lessons of the outward world, which to him was pervaded by an invisible presence. He discerned beauty and grandeur in human life, aspired to be helpful to his fellow-men, and lived in the midst of quiet domestic happiness—humble indeed, but glorified by fidelity, friendship, and love.

In Wordsworth, nature is not a background for humanity, like a painted scenery in a theater; but humanity is a foreground for nature. He had his passion for nature fixed in his blood. Hence it was from the truth of his love, that his knowledge grew, whilst most others, being merely hypocrites in their love, have turned out only charlatans in their knowledge. Professional criticism was slow to understand this new departure in poetry. Like his own Lake Country, his poems abound in barren wastes through which one must tramp wearily to find beauty-spots here and there. There is frequent prosiness in his verse; but, when the tons of dross have been carted away, there remains a heavier weight of the finest gold that can be put to the credit of any other English poet save the greatest of all.
At his inspired moments he was the equal of Shakespeare himself in splendid simplicity as when he said of the Miltonic sonnet that "the thing became a trumpet".

He was once or twice, the equal of Keats in wistful reminiscence of the antique, as when he wished "To hear old Triton blow his wreath'd horn."

But, better than all rivalling, he was Wordsworth himself—Wordsworth, who always lived with his eyes fixed on everybody's plains and hills and forests and waters, saw them all in "the light that never was on sea or land".

Wordsworth's excellence as a poet rests largely upon his great power of expression. At his best he could combine a towering splendor of diction with passionate feeling. Sometimes, as in "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways", he wrote a kind of milk-and-water poesy; and again, he could rise to the supreme height of the "Ode on Intimations of Immortality"—his masterpiece. This poem cannot be read properly excepting in its entirety; and in spite of its vagueness and timid approaches to pantheism, it is one of the noblest and most inspiring reflections on human dignity in literature. Nowhere else is Wordsworth's diction so apt and monumental, though it must be said that most of his poems, even those written on vapid themes, are distinguished by phrases glowing

2. Ibid., p. 212.
with a conviction. The "Ode" compensates abundantly for much that the bulk of Wordsworth's poetry lacks: for the absence of lyric gayety and the presence of too much Wordsworth, discussing himself in solemn fashion; for the want of rough manliness which finds in nature a realm to subdue and not a deity to worship sentimentally; and for a failure to see in the miracle of human affections a source of song incomparably greater than any wood or stream. The "Ode on Immortality" is perhaps the highest attainment of poetry in the nineteenth century. What is more beautiful than these splendid lines:

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison house begin to close
Upon the growing boy,
And he beholds the light and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The youth, who daily further from the east
Must travel, still in nature's priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day."

Wordsworth is absolutely without humor and so he often fails to see the small step that separates the sublime from the ridiculous. In no other way can one explain "The Idiot Boy", or pardon the serious absurdity of

"Peter Bell". But after the golden wheat is separated from the chaff, the English poet laureate of 1843 is found, with a considerable volume to his credit—a volume of wholesome, inspired, and unrivaled verse.
IV.

But there is no writer named amongst men, of whom, so much as of Percy Bysshe Shelley, it is difficult for a conscientious critic to speak with the truth and the respect due to his exalted powers, yet without offense to the most sacred feelings, which too memorably he outraged. A healthy, genuinely Christian sympathy, allied to poetic insight, is needed to appreciate him fully. Even as a student at Oxford he longed in vain for the sympathetic heart, a friendly hand of but one of the teachers. To the poet—and Shelley had in him the material for one of the greatest of poets—the most attractive, the most influential of created beings is an able, soulful man. It is the Poet's privilege to be drawn to the works of God, to outward and inward nature, with resistless force, and a soulful man is God's masterpiece. Shelley's passion was for the beautiful, his perfect desire was for the perfect good, his delight was in nature, his rapture in nature's truth and simplicity. He was ever pouring forth admiration, laden with longing for the better, ever "panting for the music which is divine"; hence his lyrical splendor and his lyrical abundance. His brain was an ever-heaving ode to beauty, freedom, and love. Any event, person or object could
become the vent for drawing from this deep, general spring and individual stream of felicitous verse.

"Shelley is sidereal. His poetry is a super-earthly canopy, overhanging mankind, glittering with the clear, pure twinkle of stars, having the beauty and significance of stars and frequently their remoteness". Yet, however distant and aerial in his range, humanity is ever present to his heart. In his verse there are glimpses of a better, happier future. It is a high distinction for a mind to busy itself lovingly with the future of man. Within Shelley's being lay a deep, rich humanity overflowing with hopes and aspirations. Shelley's imaginations are fed by divine influences that unceasingly replenish a pure soul's atmosphere. His brain is an exhaustless spring of likenesses, illuminated into beauty and significance by his poetic faculty.

When conscious of his vocation and powers, the growth of a great poet is something to fill the gods with their sunniest gladness. As in the case of Shelley, when the poet is ennobled by the man, earth presents a promising, animating process to become a great poet. During his life in Italy Shelley's outward senses were daily cultivated in the beautiful presence of that chosen land, while his inward senses were fed by records of the words and deeds

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2. Ibid., p. 196.
3. Ibid., p. 196-197.
of the lofty men who had been attracted to Italy at all

Shelley was so fond and capable of soaring, but,

however high his flight, never was the cord that bound
his heart to humanity broken; so strong was the beat of
that heart and so warm its blood, that the closer he came
to his fellows, the more musical is the ring of his verse,

the more poetical its tissue. Shelley, through his ex-
quisite sensibility of the beautiful in its manifold dis-
play, in quick alliance with a keen intellect, was an
unsurpassed master of artistic presentation. But for him
the most necessary beauty in a poem is moral beauty. As
artist he knew the futility of making poems the direct

the class of spontaneous poets who draw their material
chiefly from within, their souls being fresh, deep

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fountains of thought and poetry." Only deep, full

sensibilities beget poetic deeps, and of these there are
more in Shelley than in some other poets, but his writings
are too deep to be popular. Yet there is no reader

possessing taste and judgment who will not do homage

2
to his pen.

While Wordsworth was visiting Switzerland during
1816, he met Shelley, who was then an obscure poet

1. Ibid., p. 235.
2. Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, p. IX.
dreaming enthusiastically of the future. Shelley left verse in which there is the charm of the highest poetic inspiration. He, too, was essentially a poet of the Revolution, and the strangeness of some of Shelley's ideas in his poems was the result of his education and experience.

Shelley's character was complex and puzzling. After his death two small volumes were found in his pockets: a copy of AEschylus in Greek and the latest work of Keats. He could have given no better index of his mind. Fundamentally his spirit sought comradeship with poetic beauty as it had come to be during the ages, as it is eternally; and he was generous enough to look eagerly for it in the verse of a rival writer, dead only a brief while. This search for ideal beauty was the ruling passion of Shelley's very boyish life. He hunted it first of all in freedom, because the drab restrictions of his boyhood had seemed so utterly meaningless and ugly. Later on he sought for it in the solitude of nature, while his eyes rested with the wandering delight of a child on the blue Italian hills. One cannot help asking, "What if Shelley had met Saint Francis?"

No one can doubt the lyric excellence of Shelley's verse. His language thrills with emotions of supreme
grace and intensity, whether the mood be cheerfulness or blank despair. Though he was usually out of touch with the real world, he felt constantly, like his own skylark, with a full heart; and his power to see and reproduce the beautiful was remarkably swift and sure. Not many poets have been such close students of their art. Though he might have gathered wisdom from a longer life, he could hardly have expected it to teach him more about the art of expression. And yet there is a thin intellectual substance of Shelley's work. He could produce a calm and connected explanation of his beliefs or purposes, but the substructure of his verse is a constant impossible idealistic theory of life. Strange as it may appear, his deepest instincts were religious. He had a subtle sense of relationship with the spiritual life of the world, and an inborn longing to rise above the levels of space and time to perfection. His creed, in so far as he stated it, was pantheism. Shelley wove together the beauty of creation and its Creator, understanding neither, but struggling for a knowledge of both.

Shelley is one of a small number of supreme lyric geniuses of English literature. The list of his great lyrics is not extensive, but even the least sympathetic student of his life and philosophy admit his supremacy as a lyric poet. Shelley's lyrics "are noted for fitness

2. Pace, English Literature, p. 250.
of metrical form to sense as well as for more felicitous language and imagery."

"Ode to the West Wind" and "To the Skylark" illustrate all the essential characteristics of Shelley's genius.

Shelley, like Byron, was a rebel against society, as Wordsworth and Coleridge had been rebels against literary tradition. Like Byron, Shelley wrote his last work in Italy. Like Byron, Shelley was a headlong and a too prolific writer. But unlike Byron, Shelley was inspired to reform society, though his plans to accomplish this reform were quite incoherent and unintelligible. Unlike Byron, Shelley was a great poet of power, who, amidst almost universal indifference or contempt, sang simply because the song would out. He felt intensely, and his works everywhere display the ethereal spirit of genius of a rare order—abstract, perhaps, but not less powerful. His is the poetry of intellect, not that of the Lakers. Shelley's theme is of an intellectual nature and lofty feeling, not of wagoners or idiot children. His faults in writing are obvious, but equally so are his beauties. Shelley is too much of a philosopher, and dwells too much upon favorite images, that draw less upon one's sympathies than those of social life. Shelley's philosophy would have worshipped in some chapel of the

1. Idem.
2. Gingerich, op. cit., p. 235.
sun, whereas Keats, who accepted life gladly, though with a delicious, diligent indolence, would have worshipped in some chapel of the moon, but Shelley, who hated life because he sought more in life than any understood, would have wandered, lost in a ceaseless reverie, in some chapel of the star of infinite desire. His language is lofty and no one knows better how to cull, arrange, and manage syllables of his native tongue. He thoroughly understands metrical composition.

Shelley's life was spent in the contemplation of nature, in arduous study, or in acts of kindness and affection. Without possessing much scientific knowledge, he was unrivalled in the justness and extent of his observation on natural objects; he knew every plant by its name and was familiar with the history and habits of every production of the earth; he could interpret without a fault each appearance in the sky, and the varied phenomena of heaven and earth filled him with deep emotion. He made his study and reading room of the shadowed copse, the stream, the lake and the waterfall.

Such was his love of nature, that every page of his poetry is associated in the minds of his friends with the loveliest scenes of the countries which he inhabited. Yet the spirit in which he interprets nature is different from that animating Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the rest.

Wordsworth, a parson in poetry, was intent on the moral lessons to be drawn from the contemplation of starlight and forest gloom; Coleridge was captivated by the suggestion of wonder and of mystery which he found in created things; Keats lost himself in nature and mingled his soul with the spirit of the universe; Byron turned to nature for consolation and redress and found in her wilder moods a background against which to exhibit scars and wounds of his blighted being. To Shelley nature was an intoxicating incentive to pour out his misty philosophy of life, a starting point for the invention of a natural world of his own imaginings. In early life he visited the most beautiful parts of this country and Ireland. Afterwards the Alps of Switzerland became the inspiration.

"Prometheus Unbound," a lyrical drama, was written among the deserted and flower grown ruins of Rome. In a long preface he says the drama is an expression of his passion for reforming the world. This poem is the deification of the French Revolution. Prometheus, the friend of mankind, lies tortured and chained to the mountain side. As the hour of redemption approaches, his beloved Asia, the symbol of nature, arouses the soul of Revolution, represented by Demogorgon. He rises, hurls down the enemies of progress and freedom, releases Prometheus, and spreads liberty and happiness through all the world. Then the Moon, the Earth, and the Voices of the Air break forth into a magnificent chant of
praise. The most delicate fancies, the most gorgeous imagery, and the most fiery, exultant emotions are combined in this poem with something of the stateliness of its Greek prototype. The swelling cadences of the blank verse and the tripping rhythm of the lyrics are the product of a nature rich in rare and wonderful melodies. One of the most charming of the lyrical passages is assigned to the Fourth Spirit in Act I:

"On a poet's lips I slept
Dreaming like a love-adapt
In the sound his breathing kept;
Nor seeks nor finds he mortal blisses,
But feeds on the aerial kisses
Of shapes that haunt thought's wildernesses.
He will watch from dawn to gloom
The lake-reflected sun illume
The yellow bees in the ivy-bloom,
Nor heed nor see, what things they be;
But from these create he can
Forms more real than living man,
Nurslings of immortality."

These lines are vividly suggestive of Shelley's own poetic temper.

Another subject that Shelley treats most frequently in his verse is ideal beauty. He yearned all his life for some form, beautiful enough to satisfy the aspirations of his soul. "Prometheus Unbound" breathes this insatiate craving for that Spirit and Beauty, that awful Loveliness.

Many of his efforts to describe in verse this democracy and this ideal beauty are impalpable and obscure.

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It is difficult to clothe such shadowy abstractions in clear, simple form. He is occasionally vague because his thoughts seem to have emerged only partially from the cloud lands that gave them birth. At other times, this vagueness resembles Plato's because it is inherent in the subject matter. Like Byron, Shelley is sometimes careless in the construction and revision of his verse. In vain, however, does any one search for these faults in Shelley's greatest lyrics. He is one of the supreme lyrical geniuses in the language. He sings naturally, without hesitation, liquidly, not always flawlessly. There is something in him above and below literature, something aside from it, a divine personal accident. His technique, in lyrics, is not to be compared with Coleridge's, but where Keats speaks he sings. Of all the lyric poets of England, he is the greatest master of an ethereal, evanescent, phantomlike beauty.
The youngest of these Romantic poets is John Keats. Not only was he the last, but also the most perfect of Romanticists. "Take him for what he was and did," should be the key-note of one's thought of Keats as a poet. The exquisite harmony of his actual work with his actual character, the truth of what he wrote, what his young heart saw and felt and enjoyed, the simplicity of his very exuberance of ornament and the naturalness of his artifice, the sincerity of his love of beauty and the beauty of his sincerity are the qualities, giving an individual and lasting charm to his poetry, and making his gift to the world complete in itself and very precious, although, or perhaps it were better said because, it was unfinished. That Keats would have become a virile poet, like Dante or Shakespeare or Milton, is a happy and loving guess. Certainly he is not a member of the senile school of poetry, which celebrates the impotent and morbid passions of decay.

Keats is a juvenile poet in the highest and best sense of the word,—mature, as genius always is, within the boundaries and in the spirit of his own season of life.

The very sadness of his lovely odes is the pleasant

2. Van Dyke, op. cit., p. 175.
melancholy of the springtime of the heart. The poetry of Keats, though small in bulk and slight in body as it seems to be at first sight, endures and will endure in English literature, because it is the embodiment of the spirit of immortal youth.

Here is touched its secret as an influence upon other poets. It is beyond all doubt that it has been an influence, in the older sense of the word, which carries with it a reference to the guiding and controlling force supposed to flow from the stars to the earth. The influence of Keats can be traced not merely in the conscious or unconscious imitations of his manner, but also in the youthful spirit of delight in the retelling of old tales of mythology and chivalry, in the quickened sense of pleasure in the luxuriance and abundance of natural beauty, in the freedom of overflowing cadences transmuting ancient forms of verse into new and more flexible measures, in the large liberty of imaginative diction, making all nature sympathize with the joy and sorrow of man, in brief, in many of the finest marks of a renascence, a renewed youth, which characterize the poetry of the early Victorian era. Matthew Arnold caught from John Keats the strange and searching melody of "The Forsaken Merman", or learned to embroider the laments for "Thyris" and "The Scholar-Gypsy," with such opulence of varied bloom as makes death itself seem lovely.  

1. Van Dyke, op. cit. p. 179.
Indeed, justice is not done to the influence of Keats unless the direct and distinct effects it produced in the art of painting is recognized. The English pre-Raphaelites owed much to his inspiration. Holman Hunt found two of his earliest subjects for pictures in "The Eve of St. Agnes" and "The Pot of Basil". Millais painted "Lorenzo and Isabella," and Rossetti "La Belle Dame sans Merci".\(^1\)

There is an evident sympathy between the art of these painters, which insisted that every detail in a picture is precious and should be painted with truthful care for its beauty, and the poetry of Keats, which is filled, even overfilled, with minute and loving touches of exquisite elaboration.

The memory and influence of Keats endure, and will endure, because his poetry expresses something in the heart that will not die so long as there are young men and maidens to see and feel the beauty of the world and the thrill of love. His poetry is complete, it is true, it is justified, because it is the fitting utterance of one of those periods of mental life which Keats himself has called "the human seasons". He held that "beauty is truth", but held also another article that has too often been left out in the repetition of his poetic creed: he held "truth, beauty", and he hoped one day to give a clear, full utterance to

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1. Idem.
that higher, holier vision. Perhaps he has, but not to mortal ears. A fortunate acquaintance with Leigh Hunt, whose poetry was not nearly so famous as his turbulent and radical Whig journalism, resulted in Keats' introduction to a group of revolutionary literary people and in the publication of his first book of verse. This volume was not remarkable excepting for certain brightly imaginative phrases, and met with no success. The young poet persevered resolutely at his task, though he was hampered by the appearance of a tendency to consumption and obliged to seek a favorable climate. He published "Endymion," a lengthy poem in four books, and then made a tour through the English Lake District and Scotland, where he contracted the throat trouble which ultimately developed into consumption. Just after his return to England appeared the famous attacks on "Endymion". Keats had fervent defenders in Shelley, who in his "Adonais" calls his friend's assailants assassins, and in Byron, who devoted to Keats the following stanza in "Don Juan":

"John Keats, who was kill'd off by one critique
Just as he really promised something great,
If not intelligible without Greek
Contrived to talk about the gods of late,
Much as they might have been supposed to speak.
Poor fellow! His was an untoward fate;
'Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle,
Should let itself be snuff'd out by an article." 1

Keats, though his health was breaking, continued to write.

1. Canto XI, Stanza 60.
Accompanied by a friend, the artist Joseph Severn, he went to Rome to escape the rigors of the English climate, and there, before the next spring came, he died in 1821, a poet even to the end: "I feel the daisies growing over me."  

His grave, near Shelley in the Protestant Cemetery, in Rome, has inscribed his self-composed epitaph, "Here lies one whose name was writ in water."  

Keats did not live to produce so much as several of his contemporaries, yet his poetry is more magnanimous. His first two volumes were marred by many affections. The notion once prevailed, due mainly to Shelley's indignant lament in "Adonais" and Byron's flippant jest in "Don Juan," that Keats was practically killed off by harsh criticism of his writings in English reviews. He was not "snuff'd out by an article"; that, as Matthew Arnold said, he had "flint and iron in him, that he had character."  

It would be a mistake to suppose that Keats was an effeminate weakling. Notwithstanding his poor health, he was sturdy, manly, and outspoken in manner. In personal appearance Keats resembled a bluff yeoman: his face was strikingly handsome, with a firm jaw, and his stockily built figure seemed endowed with muscular strength. The truth is that the man was almost completely lost in the poet; that the poet was greater than the man. The third

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1. Brother Leo, English Literature, p. 389.  
2. Idem.  
3. Arnold, op. cit., p. 112.
volume he produced contains poetry of the most exquisite quality. Most of his loveliest, strongest works, as "Hyperion", are in fragments. All that is best in him might be held in a small volume, and most of his work was done in four years. 

Keats was for a while democratic in tendency, but the effects of the French Revolution are not perceptible in him. Since his death, his fame has increased more and more. He has long since been given his place by the side of Shelley and Byron. Rather absurdly has John Keats been likened to Shakespeare; for as Frederic Harrison has well observed, "Keats can no more be compared with Shakespeare than Mont Blanc with one of its snowy pinnacles". Yet there are three points on which the two poets resemble each other. First, each produced literature of a very high order. Secondly, neither sounded a personal note or made their writings a medium for self-revelation: what they wrote gives few indications of what they were. This is all the more remarkable in Keats, since he was a lyric poet, not a dramatist, and the lyric poet almost necessarily writes about himself. Thirdly, both Shakespeare and Keats strikingly illustrate the miracle of genius. The Stratford rustic and the son of the London liveryman had but a meager formal education, and the externals of their lives were not such as to develop distinguished gifts; yet both the Elizabethan

player and the Cockney medical student achieved and enjoy
great and undying fame.¹

Keats is further remarkable as illustrating the
truth that in literature quality counts for more than
quantity. Most supreme writers have written copiously as
well as excellently, but to Keats falls the distinction of
being represented by but three volumes of verse. And his
best work was done within the small space of two years.
A prey to tuberculosis, he died at the age of twenty-six,
an age when most writers have not yet found themselves
or tested their powers.

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty— that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."²

These lines from Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" give the
whole of his poetic creed, and the clew to his place in
English poetry. The high priest of beauty, he took a firm
stand against didactic poetry, contending that if a poem
gives pleasure by appeal to one's love of beauty, one
need not look for a meaning, a lesson, to explain the appeal.
The love of beauty was with him a passion; and it fixes his
place as a Romanticist. This quality had been lost during
the eighteenth century, and Keats restored it to English
poetry by writing in the spirit of the old Greek lyric
writers.

Keats looked back upon the Romantic revival with a

¹. Ibid., p. 388.
². Stanza V.
clear and triumphant consciousness of what it had effected. Poetry, as it came to him, was not a spiritual vision, as with Wordsworth, nor an emancipating vision, as with Shelley, but a joy wrought out of sensations as exquisite as Coleridge's by an imagination not weird and mystic like his, but plastic and pictorial. The poet was a teller of "heart-easing things". The poetry of force was already repugnant to Keats; the lines, full of genius imperfectly expressed, in which he denounces it, show unconsciously how deep was the psychical gulf between him and Wordsworth and Shelley. Wordsworth, who at his best may seem to be the supreme master of poetical style, is often out of key; Shelley, who at his best may seem to be almost the supreme singer, is often prosaic; Keats is never prosaic and never out of key. To read Wordsworth and Shelley, one must get in touch with their ideas, at least apprehend them; to read Keats, one has only to surrender his senses to their natural happiness. One must get at Shelley's and Wordsworth's point of view; but Keats has only the point of view of the sunlight. He cannot write without making pictures with his words, and every picture has its own atmosphere. To Keats, the thing itself and the emotion were indistinguishable; he never saw without feeling, and he never felt without passion. That is why he can call up atmosphere by the mere bewitchment
of a verse which seems to make a casual statement; because nothing, with him, can be a casual statement, nothing can be prosaic or conceived of coldly, apart from that "principle of beauty in all things" which he tells he had always loved, and which to him was the principle of life itself.

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing",

he declared in the first lines of "Endymion". To this gospel he remained staunchly loyal, although his later poems were burdened with brooding over the sadness and brevity of life. His art combined the painter's eye for color with the sculptor's sense of form. No one reads Keats for the ecstasy of lyric imagination which is Shelley's virtue, or for the high seriousness of melodious reflection, but because he could so vividly see, feel, and refashion beauty.

"Endymion," the first work of Keats, has nothing to teach, no thought, or scheme of thought, to unfold, no real story to tell, nothing but its own wealth of phrase and imagery to recommend it. The cardinal fault of "Endymion" is that it is confused and unequal, and is overlaid by excessive imagery. No one however, felt its defects more keenly than its author, and no criticism could be more just than the criticism of his own preface to it. In a few manly sentences Keats told his critics that he recognized in his work a

feverish attempt rather than a deed accomplished, and was content that it should die, having some hope that, while it is dwindling, he may be plotting and fitting himself for verses fit to live. The touching modesty of its preface should have saved it from the harsh handling of a careless or hostile criticism. But neither of these results followed. The poem was universally ridiculed, and Keats' first offering of beauty was contemptuously flung back in his face.

Like Shelley, the rapidity with which Keats' genius matured is astonishing. Destiny seemed anxious for the brevity of the time for work by hastening its advance. In the later poems of Keats there is no trace of the confusion of "Endymion." In such poems as "Hyperion" and "Lamia" Keats heaped up so many color impressions that the effect is bewildering and somewhat cloying. "Hyperion" is a fragment only, but it is second in sublimity and massiveness only to the work of Milton. In "Lamia", and the "Eve of St. Agnes" there is workmanship which is so excellent that it is vain to hope that it can be excelled. His best work, however, is tastefully restrained. The "Eve of St. Agnes" is an almost flawless narrative poem, romantic in its conception and artistic in its execution. The interest in the story, the mastery of poetic language, the wealth and variety of the imagery, the atmosphere of medieval days,
combine to make this poem unusually attractive. The following lines from the "Eve of St. Agnes" appeal to the senses of sight, odor, sound, and temperature, as well as to romantic human feeling and love of the beautiful:

"...like a throbbing star
Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose;
Into her dream he melted, as the rose
Blendeth its odor with the violet,-
Solution sweet: meantime the frost-wind blows
Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet
Against the window panes; St. Agnes' moon hath set." 1

In the half dozen great Odes, which Keats has written, there is work which the greatest of poets might have been proud to claim. In the subtle magic of suggestive phrase, such as

"Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn", 2

Keats has no master. There is a veritable enchantment about these Odes. They surprise one, indeed, by a fine excess, and intoxicate the imagination with their beauty. They frequently reveal also a patient observation of nature, and an accuracy in describing her, which is akin to Wordsworth. Some of his phrases, in the delicacy and intensity of their imagination, fairly rival Shakespeare. They fix themselves instantly in the memory, and cannot be shaken off. In all there is a sense of romantic youth which is in itself fascinating.

They seem to incorporate most perfectly the gifts of diction

1. Stanza XXXVI.
and emotion which make Keats a great poet.

John Keats' influence upon the poets of his century has been unique and abiding. There is scarcely a poet, from his own day to the days of Tennyson and Rossetti, with but the exception of Wordsworth, who does not show some trace of his influence. But for Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, and Coleridge, nature is an inexhaustible source and provocative of lovely imaginings. Wordsworth conveys the loneliness of the mountains; Shelley, the timeless energies of wind; Keats, the embalmed darkness of verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways with an intensity which makes all the nature poetry seem pale. And all the masters of that region in which Romance and nature meet—in which imagination brings one nearer to the heart of reality by apparently deserting it; the room which Coleridge enters when he arrays the dim horror and fascination that the unknown ocean inspires in a phantom garb of poetry to fit it; or Wordsworth, when he renders those mysterious suggestions of unearthly presence—Fear and trembling Hope, and Death and the Skeleton, and Time and the Shadow—which have hallowed the shade of great trees; or Keats, when he renders the enchantment of the nightingale's song thrilling—the bird representing the human race. Yet no one can appreciate what Keats did without remembering that it was only a part of what he hoped to do.

The poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge shows the revolutionary reaction against classicism in literature and tyranny in government; but their verse raises no cry of revolt against the proprieties and moral restrictions of the time. Byron was so saturated with the revolutionary spirit that he rebelled against these also. As Byron frequently wrote in the white heat of passionate revolt, his verse, unlike that of Keats, shows the effects of lack of restraint. Unfortunately he did not afterwards take the trouble to improve his subject matter, or the mold in which it was cast. The great power of Byron's poetry consists in its wealth of expression, its vigor, its rush and volume of sound, its variety, and its passion. Coleridge was a failure, but left behind him the most searching and sound expositions of poetry ever attempted by an Englishman. It is a pity that his vast stores of erudition were not molded into some colossal masterpiece of which English literature might be proud; but alas! they lie strewn upon the plain like the quarried ruins of some ancient city.

One of the saddest themes for consideration in literature is the ill-starred life and early death of three
of its greatest poets. Byron died by misadventure, one might almost say, at the very moment when he had begun to throw off the poisonous morbidity of earlier years, and certainly at a time when there was no token of failing powers. Shelley was drowned at a time when his genius had begun to show a magnificent promise of ripening power, and when his early errors had not only been amply atoned for, but were repented and forsworn. John Keats completes the list of poets of great genius and commanding influence, overwhelmed by misfortune, and cut off in the very prime of hope and achievement; and in many respects Keats' is the saddest history of them all. Byron and Shelley, at least, had some recognition of their powers accorded them. Byron had both ample and generous awards of fame in his own time, but Keats passed out of the world before the world had in the least perceived the rare spirit which had been in it. Even those, who had been his most intimate friends, had no commensurate understanding of the height and scope of his genius.

To sum historically the effects of the Romantic Movement as culminating in the poetry of Keats, it is necessary to recognize how essentially its life is connected with the social causes that produced the French Revolution, and how vividly the secret influences that
determined the successive stages of its course are revealed in the respective poetic ideals of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats. There can be no question that these three poets derived political inspiration from the same source, namely, that atmosphere of boundless hope which exalted the imagination of Europe on the eve of the French Revolution.

In their writings these five romantic poets wrote the feeling and imagination of the two great subjects of nature and humanity. This study includes: The poets Wordsworth and Coleridge, who did not so much originate as give direction to the romantic revival; Byron and Shelley, often called revolutionary poets; and the poet Keats, whose works are famous for their sense of beauty and their almost perfect workmanship. Keats' early death doomed him to be the poet of youthfulness which privileged him to become and enduringly to remain the poet of happy expectation and passionate delight. 1

There can be no close more fitting for this chapter and, in fact, for the whole thesis than these lines from Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Adonais*, *An Elegy on the Death of John Keats*:

"But now, thy youngest, dearest one has perisht,  
The nursling of thy widowhood, who grew,  
Like a pale flower by some sad maiden cherish'd,  
And fed with true love tears instead of dew.  
Most musical of mourners, weep anew!  
Thy extreme hope, the loveliest and the last,"  

1. Dawson, op. cit., p. 58
The bloom whose petals nipt before they blew
Died on the promise of the fruit, is waste;
The broken lily dies—the storm is overpast'.

1. Stanza VI.
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